

# Generosity Without a Name Tag: Educational Wisdom in the Spirit of *Il Caffè Sospeso*

Kanako W. Ide

*Soka University and University of Maryland Global Campus*

## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever bought or been treated to a cup of coffee by a friend? Many of us are familiar with this experience of generosity and friendship. What, then, of *caffè sospeso*, the traditional practice originating in Napoli, Italy and the title of a book by Neapolitan philosopher Luciano de Crescenzo?<sup>1</sup> “Suspended coffee,” as it translates into English, is also known internationally as an anonymous way to express generosity. *Caffè sospeso* involves the practice of buying two cups of coffee at the coffee shop: one for yourself, and the other in advance as a gift to an unknown recipient. This paper considers the difference between these two ways of expressing generosity. Are these practices done out of self-interest or altruism? Why do people practice anonymous generosity? Is it a waste of money or a worthy way to spend money? And if so, what, if anything, does it contribute to society and the way we understand moral education?

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the moral value embedded in a practice of generosity that does not come with the giver’s name tag. I use *caffè sospeso* as a good example of this kind of anonymous generosity. This paper also argues that, beyond benefiting the receiver, anonymous generosity signals a kind of positive social value. In order to articulate its morality, I will apply the metaphor of three different cups of coffee, all gifted in different contexts. These three cups all hold the same taste and aroma, and are all made by the same barista, yet each one represents a different moral meaning. The first cup is commercialized, bought by a business person for a present or potential client. The second cup is gifted in friendship, in the way that friends or community members treat each other to a coffee to express loyalty or solidarity. The third cup is *caffè sospeso*, a gift given without knowledge of the donor’s name or the receiver’s face.

Through the first cup, we will examine the preliminary question: is it a waste of money to treat somebody to a cup of coffee? To respond, the paper applies a critique related to the notion that everything in a marketized society has a price. The paper then considers whether it is a worthy way of spending money, applying the argument of mutual aid as a priceless social value and practice. After that, the main question is examined: what are the moral differences between two cups of coffee, one as a gift that bears the donor's name, and one that does not? By discriminating between the qualities of generosity embedded in the second and third cups, the paper demonstrates the moral values of anonymous generosity. Further, three possible counterarguments against anonymous generosity are examined to confirm the morality in the practice of *caffè sospeso*. They are: firstly, the idea that neoliberal value has a powerful influence in contemporary society; secondly, the issue of human necessity; and thirdly, the issue of self-interest, or of those who take advantage of others' generosity. The paper finally concludes that anonymous generosity is a precious moral value that maintains community ties, is a moral practice for good, and a very important aspect of moral education.

### GENEROSITY OR ULTERIOR MOTIVE

Is it a waste of money to treat somebody to a cup of coffee? From the perspective of value in the market economy, if the treat becomes an investment by creating a profit greater than what was spent, then it is a justifiable and worthy expenditure. For instance, when a business person buys a cup of coffee for a potential client as a means of creating favorable conditions for a business opportunity, and their anticipation is met, the cup of coffee meets the scale of investment, and therefore is not a waste. In the market economy context, a gift that is given with no promise of return is a waste of money. "Buy 1 Get 1 Free" is a favorable offer, but "Get 1 for the Price of 2," which is the practice of *caffè sospeso*, would be out of the question.

Michael Sandel argues that moral qualities such as generosity should not be interpreted on an investment scale. Sandel does not fully disregard the values ascribed to market economy, but rather makes a case for the "moral limits [...] of market reasoning,"<sup>2</sup> arguing that it is important to clas-

sify the subject areas that should be preserved as priceless. Sandel assumes that moral reasoning and market reasoning are different, and that when the two are collated into the same scale of investment, it actually harms people's natural sense of morality. Further, when the scale of investment is misidentified as an absolute value, "It ignores the possibility that our capacity for love and benevolence is not depleted with use but enlarged with practice."<sup>3</sup> While spending money reduces the total amount of money one holds, practicing morality has the opposite effect in that a person's morality increases the more they practice it. As a result, people are deluded if their idea of good moral practice is something that involves consumable materials.

Sandel's argument affirms that anonymous generosity should be examined outside of market economy discourse. Also, it reminds us to be conscious of the fragile border between the cup of coffee bought out of generosity and the one bought with ulterior motives, because they are indistinguishable by look, aroma, or taste. On the other hand, his argument poses a paradox. While his critique of the negative moral and social impact associated with market reasoning is strong, he does not provide an alternative reasoning for justifying the cups of coffee bought out of generosity. Thus, we need to re-frame the question: is it worth it to spend money on a cup of coffee for someone else?

#### A WORTHY WAY OF SPENDING MONEY

In order to defend the generosity of gifting a cup of coffee, this paper considers whether it contributes to the spirit of the gift.<sup>4</sup> In gift economy reasoning, the spirit of the gift is its main component, while its physical composition is just a reflection of that spirit. Also, the gift has to be circulated. If this cup of coffee is received thankfully, rather than being taken for granted, the receiver can practice the spirit of the gift by paying it forward. When that happens, the cup of coffee given in generosity is in circulation, and thus qualifies as a gift. According to gift economy, if the recipient doesn't pass the gift on, and only receives it, the spirit of the gift has failed—this is what we might call the colonization of the market economy norm. Despite hinting at it, Sandel does not directly tackle this as a possible alternative theo-

retical framework.<sup>5</sup>

Tetsuo Najita, an American historian, defends gifting as a valuable way of spending money. According to Najita, the first generation of Japanese Americans in Hawaii practiced ordinary economy, a kind of gift economy system in which each participant contributes an agreed amount of money to the community, and the community either circulates the wealth to participants as and when they need it, or saves it as a form of crisis management for minimizing future damage.<sup>6</sup> He claims that it is a practice of reciprocity among socially marginalized people, who need access to practical solutions and pre-emptive disaster measures that do not require them to confront local authorities, as this tends not to yield the same results.<sup>7</sup>

Najita discusses three features of this unofficial mutual aid system that explain why it has been successfully practiced for so long outside of the market economy system, and how it became the foundation of social success for Japanese Americans in Hawaii, despite this not having been its initial goal. First, ordinary economy has been practiced without instruction from political authority because it is characterized specifically as a system that deals with the absurdities caused by that authority in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Second, this unofficially formed mutual aid system functions as a kind of insurance for powerless populations. Third, the practice simultaneously functions to create mutual community bonds at the moral and practical level. As a result of the double roles of creditor and debtor being taken on at once, “the phrase ‘mutual aid’... remains a powerful imperative underlying the moral consciousness of the populace.”<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Sandel, Najita demonstrates how spending money and practicing morality can come together in the example of ordinary economy. Also, while Sandel focuses on finding reasons for why and how practices attached to the investment scale destroy morality and community, Najita explores why and how the practices embedded in gift economy nurture and sustain them. Sandel writes of “certain moral and civic goods that markets do not honor and money cannot buy,”<sup>10</sup> but Najita discusses useful ways to spend money in service of moral and civic good. The implication of these contrasts is that

Najita's discussion supplements Sandel's ambiguity. It is worth it to buy a cup of coffee for another when the spirit of the gift and generosity reflected in it functions as a medium to connect people, as well as to nurture an ongoing practice of reciprocity in the community.

### DIFFERENT QUALITIES OF GENEROSITY

Now, we shall turn to a classification of the two kinds of generosity addressed in the introduction: treating someone you know to a cup of coffee, and *caffè sospeso*. Both cups of coffee taste the same and are generous gifts. However, the quality of the generosity involved in each cup is more complex.

Elizabeth Anderson provides reasonable explanations of the moral quality of the gift in the context of friendship to discuss "the ethical limitation of the market."<sup>11</sup> She states that "[t]he goods exchanged and jointly realized in friendship are not merely used but cherished and appreciated, for they are expressions of shared understandings, affections, and commitments."<sup>12</sup> A cup of coffee you gift to your friend promotes loyalty and trust between you. In addition, even though Anderson is correct that "...gifts are given for the friend's sake, not merely for the sake of obtaining some goods for oneself in return..."<sup>13</sup>, receiving a generous gift from your friend in the future in return is highly possible. This is because "[f]riends act not just for the sake of preserving their friendship, but to promote one another's welfare."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the quality of generosity represented by a gift-giving practice where the donor and recipient know each other is one that promotes closeness, loyalty, and mutual aid, as well as cultivates relationships between those involved.

What, then, of the character of generosity reflected in the third cup of coffee? The biggest difference between them is the donor's name tag. It indicates that, while the second cup of coffee helps the donor and receiver to improve the closeness of their relationship, the third cup intentionally maintains a social distance by disconnecting the donor and receiver through anonymity. Francesco Buscemi, articulating the spirit of *caffè sospeso*, discusses the influence of the combination of social distance and anonymity embed-

ded in this practice.

This ‘blind’ link between the donor and the receiver meant that the receiver was not able to recognize the donor, to say ‘thank you’ to him or her, and to acknowledge his or her culinary capital.<sup>15</sup>

These two elements of anonymity and social distance eliminate any chance of mutual acknowledgment. This marks another difference between this practice and the second cup of coffee bought for a friend. Even without any expectation of return, it is still good manners for your friend to say thank you, and if they do not, your heart and your friendship may suffer a small scratch. The practice of *caffè sospeso*, rather, is a kind of double-blind system in which both parties seek to avoid being acknowledged by the other. In order to identify *caffè sospeso* as a morally valuable practice, rather than as a waste of money or a self-sacrifice, some rational explanation is required about the nature of its “return,” not in the market economy sense, but in the sense of gift theory. At the same time, the explanation should go beyond the “return” expected on the second cup of coffee.

While the lack of mutual acknowledgment in *caffè sospeso* prevents the direct exchange of gifts, the characters of anonymity and social distance held in the practice mean that *caffè sospeso* can promote a wider social gift – a sense of social security and trust. This social gift has three aspects. First, by helping to perpetuate *caffè sospeso* as an active practice in the community, those who donate the cup feel the hope of a better society. The continued existence of the practice itself indicates that there is more than one generous person in the vicinity of the coffee shop. Second, those who receive a cup of coffee also receive a sense of social security in the knowledge that there is a generous person in their community. Third, a sense of security in the community is transmitted even to those who just witness the practice in action at their local coffee shop, as it is proof that there are kind people around. In all three of these aspects, *caffè sospeso* contributes to social trust at the community level. Thus, the quality of difference between the generous act performed with your name attached, and the one performed without it, is connected to

the human capacity to trust and to hold a sense of security. One cup tells you that you have a kind friend. The other imparts a general realization that there are kind people around you, beyond those you may know personally.

To summarize, three cups of coffee have been exemplified to address this paper's questions: the first cup as a means for commercial profit, the second as a way to express friendship, and *caffè sospeso* as a way to contribute to a sense of social tranquility. These three cups have different answers to the question of whether or not this is a gift of generosity. The second and the third cup are, yes, but the first is not. Then, is it a waste of money? For the first cup, the answer depends on whether or not it becomes a cause of future profit. For the second cup, the answer is hopefully no, because it is a gift given in the spirit of cultivating the relationship. For the third cup, with its anonymous nature, it is nonsense even to ask the question. Again, each of these three cups of coffee is made by the same barista, and has the same taste and aroma, but they all convey a different sense of morality and generosity.

### THREE COUNTERCLAIMS

The generosity embedded in the practice of *caffè sospeso* makes it a moral practice that uniquely contributes to fostering a sense of social peace. What then is the educational lesson we can get from the wisdom of this anonymous generosity? In order to explore this question, we will now challenge the spirit of *caffè sospeso* with three possible confrontations.

The first possible provocation is the issue of the powerful influence of market values in contemporary society. Sandel's critique remains a serious concern, because the border between the cup of coffee bought out of generosity and the one bought with an ulterior motive is a delicate one. In fact, Buscemi discusses how, in the process of *caffè sospeso* being translated into English and distributed more widely as an idea in the 2010s as "suspended coffee," the spirit of the practice was distorted and damaged by market reasoning. He states that "neo-liberalism re-uses old traditions to reinforce its primary aims of making money."<sup>16</sup> In order to popularize the idea of

suspended coffee, cafés began introducing and honoring their donors on Facebook, taking advantage of the movement to promote a positive image of their company and thus, presumably, garner more profit. Not only is this no longer anonymous generosity, but moreover, the free coffees distributed in the name of suspended coffee were used as marketing and tasting opportunities. Again, the taste and aroma of the coffee are unchanged, but through this process they become inextricable from “commercial interest.”<sup>17</sup> Buscemi states that through this transformation, “the social habit of paying for a coffee for needy people was actually a strategy to be socially successful, and receivers were upset by this discovery.”<sup>18</sup> As a result of being contaminated by this neoliberal model brought by the coffee companies, the spirit of *caffè sospeso* did not take a firm hold in the form of suspended coffee.

This indicates that the ethical role of intermediary linking donors and receivers should be taken seriously in the practice and learning of anonymous generosity. Otherwise, as in this case of marketized *caffè sospeso*, it has morally failed. In *Reciprocity*, Lawrence Becker writes that “[g]ifts and goods come to us from people – from individuals – but they often come by way of institutions.”<sup>19</sup> He writes about how it is common for there to be social distance between donor and receiver in philanthropy and social welfare activities, and that an institution systematically mediates these exchanges in order for them to function well. This indicates that a coffee shop is a justifiable mediator in the practice of *caffè sospeso*, but that only ethically-minded coffee shops can truly fulfill this function. As Buscemi explains, in a legitimate practice of suspended coffee, “the barista or the owner of the cafe did nothing to encourage customers to give, and had no interest in doing so.”<sup>20</sup> First, *caffè sospeso*'s coffees are not given away as unneeded leftovers, but bought intentionally. Second, *caffè sospeso*'s coffee is not used for a marketing opportunity. Thus, it is crucial that the coffee shop, as a medium, does not change its business attitude to accommodate this practice. In other words, Sandel would do well to risk the controversy of aiming his critique at marketing strategists and business owners directly, because, as he makes clear in his reasoning, it is in the business sphere, especially, that the separation between morality and



market reasoning must be carefully delineated.

As it is important to note that contemporary businesses do not have effective ways of controlling neoliberal values, so is it important to provide morally justifiable explanations from the viewpoint of human necessity in order to defend *caffè sospeso* as a moral practice. This is the second challenge. Is a cup of coffee really so important? Some of the Japanese Americans who practiced the ordinary economy described above worked at coffee plantations, providing the owners of the plantations with cheap labor. What historical fact tells us is not that drinking a cup of Kona coffee helped them with an opportunity to work for wages, but rather that ordinary economy was inevitably a lifeline for Japanese Americans, helping them to survive their social oppression.

Blood donation and *caffè sospeso* are anonymous practices of altruism that maintain social distance between donor and receiver through a medium, whilst sharing the quality of what Richard Titmuss calls “‘creative altruism’ (in [P.A.] Sorokin’s words)... [through which] the self is realized with the help of anonymous others.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, a cup of *caffè sospeso* is incomparable with donated blood in terms of urgency. But *caffè sospeso* offers an improvement in the quality of community security in its relation to the idea of essentiality. The practice illuminates the cultural, rather than the material, aspect of necessity in our lives. In the contrast to the necessary mutual aid practiced by the poor in ordinary economy or by the life-saving practice of blood donation, *caffè sospeso* gives only “a coffee and not a slice of bread.”<sup>22</sup> Buscemi nonetheless defends it as necessary “to the good life.”<sup>23</sup> Coffee is a luxury item, but *caffè sospeso* is a moderate practice, offering the symbolic gift of a small break in time, something deeply embedded in local Neapolitan culture. It is essential in the sense that in order to live well, everyone needs a moment to take a break, enjoy a small pleasure, and console oneself amidst his or her daily disturbances. Thus, a cup of coffee provides a superb gift of “relaxation and sensuality.”<sup>24</sup> It is a way of sharing the joy of going to the coffee shop with your friend and spending a good time together, but with physical distance. Both provide time for well-being but offer very different

ways of creating “distance from reality.”<sup>25</sup> Due to its placement between philanthropy and business, and its characters of distance, anonymity, and well-being, Buscemi also states that *caffè sospeso* has the power to “[r]e-arrange societies.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is a practice of gift-giving that is a human necessity.

The third challenge on which *caffè sospeso* needs to defend itself relates to what Becker calls “the freerider problem.”<sup>27</sup> How do we deal with those brazen-faced individuals who would take advantage of this moral practice and use it as their permanent free coffee ticket? It is not only the attitude of café as intermediary that matters in this practice, but also the receiver’s attitude. Here, again, we find a practice related to gift theory. Becker discusses the issue of “self-maximizers”<sup>28</sup> as an inevitable component of the discussion on generosity and reciprocity. He posits the rhetoric with which freeloaders justify themselves: “If enough people reciprocate, then I will not [...] if not enough people reciprocate [...] I will not do so either.”<sup>29</sup> As also concerned Sandel, one of the negative influences of neoliberal values is that it not only justifies the behavior of self-maximizers, but also increases their numbers. *Caffè sospeso* cannot function if there are either more receivers than donors, or only takers. Further, these takers are powerful enough to damage any practice of generosity, whether or not it comes with a name tag. How should we respond to such a difficult question in the context of our deeply marketized contemporary society?

This third provocation needs consideration beyond those of the last two criticisms because, as Buscemi noted above, it could end up being a trap that distorts the theoretical framework of this paper, a paper written to discuss “kind people and kind strangers,” and not “selfish people.” Thus, the freeloader’s rhetoric illustrated in Becker’s example above needs to be overturned in favor of an alternative question that allows a discussion of anonymous generosity, such as: “Why [do] human beings... feel the need to donate to others”<sup>30</sup>? Becker’s response is that “[r]eciprocity is a fundamental virtue”<sup>31</sup> and “a *fundamental* moral requirement.”<sup>32</sup> This idea that people have a natural desire to aid others, unfortunately, is not persuasive enough, as one could also say that it is natural for people to become freeloaders. What possi-

mists like Sandel need from optimists like Becker is a clear explanation: Why do some people become freeloaders, if generosity is such a naturally human trait?

Titmuss pursues a similar question in the context of his research on blood transfusion, asking “[w]hy give to strangers?”<sup>33</sup> His results show many possibilities: altruism, reciprocity, personal and general appeals, and an awareness of the need for blood. Accordingly, Titmuss concludes that generosity is educational. He states,

Men are not born to give; as newcomers, they face none of the dilemmas of altruism and self-love. How can they and how do they learn to give – and to give to unnamed strangers irrespective of age, religion or colour – not in circumstances of shared misery but in societies continually multiplying new desires and syndicalist private wants concerned with property, status and power?<sup>34</sup>

It is the role of education to teach the importance of being kind to others, both to those you know and those you do not, anonymously or otherwise. Nurturing anonymous generosity, such as that of *caffè sospeso*, is a way to inform the community that there are kind strangers in their midst. From this simple practice, the beginnings of a caring community can be fostered.

Therefore, the response to the issue of self-centered people who disturb the moral practice of generosity is to emphasize the necessity and importance of moral education. If self-centered people are becoming more prevalent in society, and if as a result the community is in crisis, then teaching the values of reciprocity and generosity should be undertaken as a serious reflection of the necessity of moral education. This does not mean to give up individualism, but to classify it. As Walter Feinberg points out, the extreme individualism of contemporary society has a tendency to justify the freeloader’s lifestyle by distinguishing it from moral individualism, thereby separating it from the sense of being considerate of others.<sup>35</sup> In other words, Sandel’s mistake was to emphasize the collapse of morality. What his argument lacks is a serious deliberation on educational approaches for rebuilding a sense of

morality from that point of collapse.

## CONCLUSION

What is the value of anonymous generosity? It is a moral practice that quietly contributes to social good, social peace, and reciprocity. However, the aim of these moral practices has rarely been about seeking acknowledgment. Rather, the quality of anonymous generosity is preserved by withholding recognition at the personal level. The actions performed as anonymous generosity may even be forgotten shortly after the fact, because they are not actions that justify or decorate the giver. These generous acts go against authoritative neoliberal values – not by laying the grounds for social revolution, but simply by disobeying them. These practices are flexible, as with *caffè sospeso*, which miraculously parasitizes the coffee shop like ivy growing on its walls. At the same time, anonymous generosity is a fragile practice, always at risk of being colonized by market values. Moreover, we cannot distinguish it by the look, taste, or aroma of a cup of coffee. Therefore, consistent moral education that teaches the value of anonymous generosity in practice is necessary.<sup>36</sup>

---

## REFERENCES

- 1 Luciano de Crescenzo, *Il Caffè Sospeso: Saggezza Quotidiana in Piccoli Sorsi* (Stampato in Italia: Oscar, 2009).
- 2 Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 28.
- 3 Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 128.
- 4 See Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983).
- 5 Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 94-130.
- 6 Tetsuo Najita, *Ordinary Economies in Japan: A Historical Perspective, 1750-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
- 7 Najita, *Ordinary Economies in Japan*, 13.
- 8 Najita, *Ordinary Economies in Japan*, 14.

- 9 Najita, *Ordinary Economies in Japan*, 235.
- 10 Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 203.
- 11 Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 143.
- 12 Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, 151.
- 13 Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, 151-152.
- 14 Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, 76.
- 15 Francesco Buscemi, "How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee': The Neo-Liberal re-'Invention of 'Tradition' from Bourdieu to Bourdieu," *European Journal of American Culture* 34, no. 2 (2015): 123-136., 128. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.34.2.123\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.34.2.123_1)
- 16 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 132.
- 17 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 129.
- 18 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 127.
- 19 Lawrence C. Becker, *Reciprocity* (New York, Routledge, 1986), 110.
- 20 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 124.
- 21 Richard M. Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy* (Chicago: Policy Press/The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 179. <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447349570.001.0001>
- 22 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 128.
- 23 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 128.
- 24 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 128.
- 25 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 128.
- 26 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 124.
- 27 Becker, *Reciprocity*, 335.
- 28 Becker, *Reciprocity*, 335.
- 29 Becker, *Reciprocity*, 141.
- 30 Buscemi, *How 'il Caffè Sospeso' Become 'Suspended Coffee'*, 124.
- 31 Becker, *Reciprocity*, 3.
- 32 Becker, *Reciprocity*, 92.

33 Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship*, 1.

34 Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship*, 2.

35 Walter Feinberg, *Japan and the Pursuit of A New American Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

36 I am very grateful to Jim Garrison, Rene Arcilla, Christin DePouw, Giada Simone, Kimiko Kuno, Alessandra Macaione, and Walter Feinberg.